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New Foods For Thought:

Maine Food Producers Add Value through Innovation

by Betsy Biemann

Most people think of Maine vegetables growing in our fields and gardens. That's not the way Tollef Olson, founder of Portland-based Ocean Approved sees it. His company produces table-ready kelp for upscale restaurants and home kitchens across the U.S. He sold more than 6,000 pounds of it last year—all grown in the Gulf of Maine.

Ocean Approved is one of a number of Maine businesses reinventing the way agricultural and marine food producers get product to the nation's tables. Innovation has long been known to contribute more than half of all economic growth. Innovators such as Olson are building on Maine's heritage and know-how, adding value to the state's natural resources, expanding into existing and new markets, and putting Maine on the map nationally and globally for food and beverages.

The Maine Technology Institute (MTI) provides seed funding and assistance that helps Maine entrepreneurs to develop, test, and bring new products to market, and its support has helped boost Ocean Approved's progress.

Another example, Gladstone's Under The Sun, located in Hancock, near the blueberry fields of Downeast Maine, processes wild blueberries using an infusion method that results in all-natural, low sugar, moist and dried wild blueberries. By drying wild Maine blueberries without the use of high fructose corn syrup or cane sugar, Gladstone's healthier food products have a longer shelf life and appeal to markets where low sugar, non-genetically modified products are

in demand. The pilot processing plant used more than 75,000 pounds of locally grown and frozen wild blueberries in 2010, and the company is now looking to expand so they can meet current sales demand.

Apple Acre Farms in South Hiram has integrated new product development into its mission, resulting in several value-added foods, such as its 100 percent apple cider syrup. Made from Maine apples that are not showcase specimens, the syrup is a tasty and versatile kitchen ingredient that takes some of the four million Maine apples normally composted at year-end and turns them into a high-value food product.

Another of the state's value-added ventures, Maine Distilleries, sprung up from the need to add value to, and find new outlets for, Maine potatoes. Both its Cold River vodka and gin products are made from potatoes grown by Green Thumb Farms in Fryeburg, which wanted to find a new markets for potatoes. The vodka venture has provided a tremendous outlet for cull potatoes. And as a ground-to-glass operation, Maine Distilleries handles every process with Maine resources, from planting the potato to distillation to bottling.

Maine needs more than individually successful companies to have a vibrant economy. It needs to develop clusters of allied businesses to drive regional business growth and economic development. These clusters can share knowledge, a skilled workforce, product-development and process-improvement capacity, and supply-chain efficiencies. To support Maine's clusters, MTT's Cluster Initiative Program targets high-potential clusters and supports collaborative industry-led initiatives that tackle obstacles and pursue joint opportunities to accelerate business growth and multiply economic impact.

Maine's value-added food cluster represents food manufacturers, distributors, retailers and packaging providers. As of 2008, this cluster comprised about 200 companies and about 6,000 jobs. In 2009, MTI funded the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership to collaborate with the Maine Grocers Association, Maine Tomorrow, and the Maine Food Producers Alliance to help these companies to thrive and to promote the state's value-added food producers. With MTT's help, this initiative is helping food producers add value to Maine's natural agricultural and marine resources and connect with each other and with the intellectual and financial assets they need to grow. 